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NOTE ON THE ORGANIZATION OF VIRGINIA
AGRICULTURE

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The story is that a German member of the Pennsylvania Legislature, a few years after the Revolution, when asked for his support of a bill to organize the militia, refused to have anything to do with an organ, saying, "Vy ve vent drough de revolution mit de vife und de drum." Some such prejudice along with great inherent difficulties of other sorts, has stood in the way of effectual association to better farming in Virginia.

The first Virginia Society for Promoting Agriculture seems to have organized in 1811 and reorganized in 1816. Of this society it is well to set down the officers' names at the reorganization, viz.:

John Taylor of Caroline,
President.

Wilson Cary Nicholas,
Vice President.

John Adams, Secretary.

Samuel Z. Adams,

John Patterson,

James M. Garnett,

Thomas Marshall,

Littleton W. Tazewell,

Assistant
Secretaries.

John Marshall,
Wilson Cary Nicholas,
John Wickham,
John Coalter,
John Adams,

Corresponding
Committee.

The Memoirs of this Society, published in 1818 by Shepherd and Pollard, were reviewed by John Holt Rice in a very interesting way in his *Literary and Evangelical Magazine* for January and February, 1819. President Taylor's address on "The Necessities, Competency, and Profit of Agriculture" was reprinted in the *Portfolio* (Philadelphia) for December, 1818, and in Niles's *Register*, Nov. 7th of the same year. John Taylor had been for years a member of the Philadelphia Agricultural Society, and perhaps his earliest published work appears in their Memoirs. Mr. Taylor died in 1824, and his Society is not at once traceable beyond 1818. It lived through 1820.

The first general meeting of Delegates from the United Agricultural Societies of Virginia was held at Parker's Tavern in Surry County, Jan. 10-12, 1820 (*American Farmer*, Vol. I, pp. 347-48). It was resolved that the annual meetings thereafter be held at French's tavern, in the town of Petersburg, on the first Wednesday in December. Delegates were present from Prince George County, Sussex, Surry, Brunswick, and Petersburg.

Edmund Ruffin was a delegate from Prince George. The officers chosen at this first meeting were General John Pegram, President, Nicholas Faulcon (of Surry) Vice President, Edmund Ruffin, Secretary. Theophilus Field Treasurer.

The Albemarle Society was not represented at this meeting: it had been established in 1817, with James Madison as President, late President of the United States.

For the years following 1819, diligence and access to files are alone necessary to bring out all the facts, since with the *American Farmer* (Baltimore), April, 1819, our agricultural journals began, it is said. From 1819 on, the *American Farmer* is full of information regarding movements in Virginia. It is unquestionable that the period from 1819 to 1860 was one of steady improvement in the agriculture of the Middle Atlantic States. For Virginia this was, of course, greatly due to Edmund Ruffin's *Farmers' Register*, which ran for some ten years after 1833. Every volume of that excellent magazine was well indexed, and

a brief examination of a file will show the editor did what he could to organize the agriculture of Virginia, and how many local societies there were in the State before 1843. The *Southern Planter* beginning in 1841, similar information may be had, at greater pains from its files.

Writing in 1834 (*Farmers' Register*, Vol. I, p. 614), James M. Garnett said, "I have been closely associated with such (agricultural) societies ever since they were first established in Virginia. All the *old ones* — to the number of some fifteen or eighteen — are utterly defunct, if I am not greatly mistaken, one only excepted." Mr. Garnett, interested to the end of his life (in 1843), in betterments of Virginia agriculture, was always a little pessimistical.

January 11, 1836, an Agricultural Convention was held at Richmond. James Barbour, President. This convention, after memorializing the Legislature in a serious arraignment of Virginia agriculture (statement drawn up by Mr. Garnett), adjourned to meet again the winter of 1837 (*Farmers' Register*, III, 620). But, said Edmund Ruffin, writing in April, 1837, "the attempt to assemble an agricultural convention in Richmond this winter was a complete failure." A good many farmers, however, acting for themselves, renewed the petition of 1836, with somewhat less of generalities, praying for the stablishment of a Board of Agriculture. (*Farmers' Register*, V. 63), March 20, 1841, the General Assembly passed an Act to establish a Board of Agriculture, the members to receive no pay, but the Act was repealed in 1843. James Barbour was the first President of this short lived Board, and Edmund Ruffin was the Secretary. Mr. Garnett was a member of this Board, and at least one famous farmer was also a member, Richard Sampson of Goochland. This first Board meant well, but knew that it had little solid support (*Farmers' Register*, IX, 688-690). There is evidence as well of the reorganization of the Virginia Society of Agriculture in 1845. Edmund Ruffin was chosen President, but he declining the post, the Hon. Andrew Stevenson was elected President. The Society dragged along, doing almost nothing (*The Farmer*, Richmond, Jan. 1866, p. 4-5).

In 1849 Governor Floyd was willing to recommend in his message the appointment of a State chemist, and the endowment of a State Agricultural Society (*Southern Planter*, IX, pp. 375-76); but the Legislature would not act.

The solid work of organization began by private enterprise about the time of the Constitutional Convention of 1852. For the year before, there is on record a rather mysterious document — a carefully worked out Act passed March 29, 1851, authorizing the appointment of an agricultural commission and chemist, the commissioner to draw a salary of \$2,500. However it was, nothing at all official came of this. In their report for 1854, the Executive Committee of the State Society of Agriculture said, "It is believed that the records of no similar institution in the world exhibit an instance of success at once so speedy, complete, and brilliant. Less than three years ago, when all former efforts to establish a State Agricultural Society had signally failed, on a dark and gloomy winter's evening, a small band of determined patriots, numbering little more than one hundred, still hopeful and undismayed, assembled at the capital of their State to make a last effort to rouse the dormant energies of Virginia, and to establish a Society that should be worthy of the intelligence of her farmers, and the ancient renown of this noble Commonwealth. The meeting was continued from day to day, a Constitution adopted, officers elected, and the Society put in successful operation. Its members and resources rapidly increased." (*Southern Planter*, November, 1854, p. 374. See also Address of B. Johnson Barbour, 1876. *So. Planter*, Jan. 1876, p. 18.) It was prosperous time, the railroads were getting up steam, and the Society had employed as field agent Gen. William H. Richardson, late Secretary of the Commonwealth, who knew how to get hold of the people.

The State Society thus active, held its very successful first Fair at Richmond the fall of 1853. County Fairs, *e. g.*, Goochland, Hanover and especially Henrico, had been well supported for ten years. This first General Fair was an emphatically pleasing surprise, and the custom was maintained for eight years regularly, through the fall of 1860. After that, there was no Fair until the fall of 1869.

In March, 1854, this vigorous State Society appointed as its own Commissioner of Agriculture the celebrated Edmund Ruffin. Mr. Ruffin's plans were Prussian in detail (see *Southern Planter*, April, 1854, pp. 116-118). Come 1855, Mr. Ruffin dropped all such peaceful vocations, and there was no Commissioner of Agriculture in the State on any footing until July 1, 1877, as under the Act of March 29 of that year. March 5, 1888, a Board of Agriculture was superimposed upon the Commissioner, and the structure was complete, that had been piecing together for so long a time.